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## THE CONDITIONS OF SUCCESS IN TEACHING THE CLASSICS <sup>1</sup>

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Every year more than half a million pupils are engaged in the study of Latin in the secondary schools of the United States. Each September more than a quarter of a million pupils are introduced to classical study. More secondary school pupils are engaged in the study of the classical languages than are engaged in the study of all modern foreign languages or are engaged in the study of any other secondary school subject except algebra, English, and history. These are facts which illustrate the responsibility resting on more than ten thousand teachers of the Classics in the secondary schools of the United States. They demand careful consideration of the conditions which determine the success or the non-success of education through the study of the classical languages and their literature. It is no unimportant task to organize properly instruction which vitally affects the education of more than half a million pupils each year.

Before entering on any discussion of the conditions of success in teaching the Classics it is well worth while to correct a common misconception of the position occupied by classical studies in the secondary school. It is the general opinion that the study of the Classics has noticeably declined within the past two decades. This is far from being the case. Greek, of course, has declined until a very small number of pupils is engaged in its pursuit, though it must be remembered that a relatively small number of secondary school pupils ever engaged in its study. On the other hand in gross numbers more pupils are receiving

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Third Annual Meeting of the American Classical League, Boston, July 3, 1922.

some instruction in Latin than ever before and in all probability at the present time a larger proportion of our total population is being brought into some contact with the Classics than at any former time. This is a fact not commonly recognized by those whose attention has been focused on the decreasing proportion of secondary school pupils engaged in classical studies. Yet it is a fact of fundamental significance not only for the influence of classical culture but also for the pedagogy of classical instruction.

Within the past quarter of a century a profoundly significant change has been taking place in American education, and particularly in secondary education. The number of pupils enrolled in the secondary schools has increased from less than half a million to more than a million and three-quarters — an increase out of all proportion to the increase in the total population. The private school, which formerly enrolled about one-third of all secondary school pupils, has gradually given undoubted lead to the public secondary school, which now enrolls nine-tenths of all secondary school pupils. The number of secondary schools has increased from less than five thousand to more than thirteen thousand. The older conception of secondary education as an educational luxury reserved for the few has been replaced by a conception of secondary education as a necessary part of the education of all citizens. The clientele of the public secondary school has changed from a relatively select group of pupils destined for a college education to a group thoroughly representative of all classes and stations. Finally our philosophy of secondary education has changed from a theory of selection for leadership to a theory which postulates that educational opportunities should be provided for each citizen according to his capacities and needs.

This evolution of our secondary school is very significant for the teacher of the Classics. In the first place it means opportunity for widening the sphere of classical influence, since a far greater proportion of the American people has been brought within reach of the secondary school. In the second place it means that instruction in the Classics must be adjusted to fundamental changes which have taken place in the character of the secondary school

population. Two or three decades ago the secondary school was almost exclusively an academic institution dominated by classical ideals and attended by those who looked forward to higher education or desired the sort of an education which was represented by preparation for college. On the whole the pupils attending the secondary school were of somewhat superior intelligence and for the most part came from homes where academic ideals prevailed. It was a relatively homogeneous group actuated by common interests and with relatively common needs. Now the secondary school enrolls pupils with widely varying capacities, interests, and needs, coming from homes which represent all conditions of life and all degrees of culture, and looking forward to widely varying destinies in life. Formerly a relatively uniform curriculum and relatively uniform methods of instruction were possible. No single and uniform curriculum, no uniform and stereotyped methods of instruction can properly meet the needs of the modern secondary school.

The pedagogy of classical instruction possesses all the advantages and all the disadvantages of a traditional institution. Its long history has permitted the development of a highly standardized and well developed methodology. It is a great advantage in that it permits effective instruction under the conditions and for those pupils for whom it was originally developed. It is a possible disadvantage in that it tends to resist modification and to retain a rigidly organized methodology not well suited to conditions different from those which it was originally developed to meet.

The methodology of classical instruction was developed and perfected to meet the capacities of relatively superior pupils whose needs were dominated by college admission requirements. Until recent times secondary education was dominated by the needs of pupils preparing for college and for the higher professions. That is no longer the case, and methodology designed to meet former needs is no longer adequate for all groups of pupils in the modern secondary school. For the most part the pedagogy of classical instruction remains much as it was when organized with primary

and almost exclusive reference to the capacities and needs of college preparatory pupils. If it is to meet the capacities, interests, and needs of other children, it must recognize the fact that their varying capacities, interests, and needs require methods of instruction adapted thereto.

All this introduces the first condition of success in teaching the Classics, or in teaching any other subject — that instruction be adapted to the capacities and needs of the pupils concerned in any case. In the modern secondary school we must recognize that we are dealing with pupils of widely differing capacities and needs. In such circumstances no highly standardized and stereotyped methodology or uniform character can be appropriate or effective. Classical instruction, as every other form of instruction, must be adapted to the varying capacities and needs of the various groups of pupils concerned. Otherwise there is no warrant or hope that it can be successful. Rather it must be foredoomed to partial or complete failure.

Instruction in the classical languages as at present organized requires for effective learning an intelligence somewhat above the average. In technical language it requires an intelligence quotient probably not less than 105, or five points above average general intelligence. This means that at least one-third, and probably nearer one-half, of all high school pupils are by nature handicapped for the study of Latin or Greek as it is taught at present in the great majority of secondary schools throughout the country. It is an indubitable fact that a large proportion of pupils in our secondary schools are by nature incapable of learning effectively the classical languages as their instruction is organized at the present time. This is only another way of saying that methods of classical instruction as at present commonly organized practically exclude a very large proportion of secondary school pupils from successful study of the Classics.

It is not on record that either the Latin language or the Greek language was reserved for those Romans or those Greeks who were endowed with intelligence above the average. Hence we may assume that it is perfectly possible for any pupil in the sec-

ondary school to learn Latin or Greek. If any pupil does not succeed in the study of either of those languages, the fault must lie either in his unwillingness to make the necessary effort or in the character of the instruction which is afforded. The fact is that teachers of the Classics have seldom made any real effort to adapt their instruction to the capacities of the pupils concerned, but have employed for pupils of all types a uniform and stereotyped method determined in large part by the text-books employed. In general they have assumed that there is a fixed and inflexible *quantum*, *quale*, and *quomodo* of instruction in Latin or Greek which constitutes a sort of intellectual and educational hurdle. If the pupil can overleap it, well and good; if not, so much the worse for him. This supremacy of the subject must give way to the supremacy of the pupil, if instruction is to be successful. Not some fixed and inflexible organization of content and method, but the pupil is the primary factor determining the character of instruction. As long as the classical teacher persists in maintaining a uniform and inflexible organization of his instruction, he cannot complain that principals and others advise all but superior pupils to avoid the study of Latin and Greek. Nor can he complain when many of his pupils fail in a study which the teacher himself has geared up to fixed standards which practically preclude successful study for a large proportion of secondary school pupils.

-Practically what does this mean? It means that the first task of the classical teacher is to study the capacities, interests, and needs of each class and, as far as possible, of each pupil in each class. On the basis of the knowledge thus disclosed he must organize content and method to meet the capacities and needs of the pupils concerned. Unless his instruction is organized on this basis, he must expect that much of his teaching will be of little avail and that no small part of his class will face failure. In particular it means that for those groups of pupils who have but recently found their way into the secondary school new methods of classical instruction must be developed and that classical instruction must vary somewhat according to the character

of the pupils concerned. The development of the modern comprehensive high school, with its numerous curricula and varying pupil groups, has created new problems for classical instruction. They must be solved by the classical teacher, if he is to be successful in meeting the requirements of new conditions.

The second major condition of success in teaching the Classics is that instruction must conform to the requirements of the laws of learning. This topic is altogether too large to permit any complete analysis here, but a few illustrations will serve to make clear the importance of this factor.

It has long been recognized that the development of motivating interests is a fundamental requirement for successful learning. This is particularly true in the case of a study which is so remote from the pupil's experience that he can have no real understanding of its character or purpose and so far removed from directly utilitarian ends that its values must be taken on faith, at least in the beginning. Such is the case with the study of the Classics, and for that reason successful teaching of the Classics is peculiarly dependent on attention to the development of motivating interests.

Two or three decades ago the general character of the secondary school population, the dominance of the college admission purpose and the common prescription of classical study tended to maintain some sort of motivating interest for the study of the classical languages. Today classical study is not a requirement for admission to most higher institutions of learning, the classical languages are not prescribed studies in most secondary schools, and competition with the numerous subjects of a greatly extended program in the secondary school have made the development of motivating interests a problem of far greater importance for the classical teacher.

One of the most significant educational developments of recent years is the practical recognition of the fact that successful learning is determined primarily by the psychology of the learner rather than by the logical relations of subject matter as viewed by the expert acquainted with the subject in its complete form.

Always, to be sure, the subject imposes certain restrictions on the organization of its content and on the methods of its instruction. Within certain limits, however, any subject may be manipulated almost at will by the teacher, and in the case of Latin or Greek it is perfectly possible to organize instruction so that it may proceed with due regard to the psychology of learning.

This topic is far too involved to permit any intensive discussion here. It may be noted, however, that at present classical instruction (though no more so than secondary school instruction in general) is very, very far from proceeding in accordance with the psychology of the learner. The laws of original learning and the laws of retention are violated constantly. The very textbooks employed, for the most part, violate every known canon of the psychology of learning. There is a vast field here for improvement in classical instruction, as well as in every other field of secondary school instruction.

A final example of the necessity of adapting instruction in the Classics to the laws of learning may be found in the tendency to mass the major part of such formal elements as morphology, syntax, and vocabulary in the first year of instruction. If there is one principle which stands out pre-eminently in the psychology of learning, it is that sufficient exercise must be provided to fix the principle or skill learned. The common practice of providing a maximum of morphology, syntax, and vocabulary in the beginning year of classical study, while providing the most meagre amount of practice in reading and writing the languages involved, is a fundamental defect in classical instruction. Happily the needed reform is already well under way and it is to be hoped that the time will soon come when the classical teacher will cease to present the entire Latin or Greek language in the first year of its study.

The third major condition of success in teaching the Classics is that instruction be so organized as to make its maximum contribution to the attainment of those aims and values for which the classical languages and literatures are studied. The final test of all instruction is whether or not it results in the development



of those knowledges, skills, powers, interests, and ideals which it is designed to develop.

The question here is not whether the educational values to be obtained through classical study justify its prominent position in the secondary school program. Whether or not the proponents or the opponents of the Classics are right in their contentions, the fact remains that over half a million secondary school pupils are actually engaged in their study. The vital question thus becomes whether or not teachers of Latin and Greek have so organized their instruction as to develop properly those values commonly claimed for classical study.

Apart from the direct use values of the Latin and Greek languages (which certainly cannot be important values for any large proportion of the great number engaged in the study of those languages) important values claimed for classical study are those which have to do with the development of general linguistic ability and with the development of social-cultural understanding and interest. If we assume that these are legitimate values to be sought in the study of the classical languages and their literatures, we may well inquire whether or not instruction is well adapted to their development.

Beyond doubt one of the most important values to be sought in the study of Latin and Greek is the development of general linguistic ability, manifested for the most part in an improved understanding and use of the English language, but by no means limited to mere matters of etymology and derivation. Are methods of classical instruction well adapted to the development of this important value? In many cases they undoubtedly are. But in many more cases it must be recognized that methods of instruction in the Classics not only are not well adapted to this end, but they are well adapted to defeat one of the most important aims claimed by the very teachers responsible. It is not too much to say that many teachers of Latin and Greek are doing damage rather than good by their neglect of correct English in the translation of the Latin and Greek and by permitting the use of loose, vague, inexact, even incorrect English. As long as the improve-

ment of language use is considered one of the important outcomes of the study of classical languages, so long must the classical teacher insist on the correct, precise, and accurate use of English to interpret the thought embodied in the foreign language. The pupil can improve neither his use of the foreign language nor his use of English as long as he is permitted to use either language in an incorrect and slipshod fashion. It must be admitted that success in teaching the Classics is conditioned by improvement over present practice in many, many schools.

A second important outcome of classical instruction should be an understanding of the life, customs, institutions, literature, and thought of the Romans and Greeks, together with some appreciation of the effect of their institutions and literature on modern civilization. Is instruction in the classical languages and their literature so organized as to develop this important value? Again, in many cases, undoubtedly yes. In many other cases, however, we must recognize that a deadening formalism of instruction has robbed pupils of those stimulating contacts with classical life and literature. To many pupils the pages of Caesar are but so many lines of vocabulary and syntax instead of a thrilling account of the conquest of Western Europe and the beginnings of civilization there. To them the orations of Cicero are but linguistic exercises instead of masterpieces of literature or pictures of Roman life and government. To them the Aeneid or the Iliad are but tasks to be performed rather than the greatest epics ever written. To them the study of Latin and Greek literature is but a form of linguistic gymnastics, empty of content and devoid of interest. Instruction which permits this state of affairs cannot mean success in teaching the Classics, however successful it may be in teaching the anatomy of the classical languages.

In addition to the rather definite values mentioned, more general disciplinary values are commonly claimed for classical instruction — those values which involve the transfer of improved efficiency. Here no attempt can be made to analyze the pros and cons of transfer values. However, this may be said, that there can be no transfer to other fields of traits which have not been

developed in the original study. Certain it is that habits of mental work, ideals of thoroughness, ideals of accuracy and precision of thought, attitudes toward study and intellectual achievement — these traits cannot be generalized and transferred from the field of classical study to other fields unless they have really been developed in connection with the field of classical study in the first place. *Ex nihilo nihil fit*. Hence it is that those teachers who hope to develop generalized habits and ideals through the study of the Classics must recognize that this certainly cannot be done unless those same habits and ideals are cultivated in connection with classical study itself. Whatever transfer values are legitimately related to classical study must be fostered by the organization of its instruction.

Is classical instruction at present so organized as to meet this demand? Can it be said that classical instruction is so organized as to make its maximum contribution to the development of habits and ideals of thoroughness, of precision and accuracy, of attitudes toward study and intellectual achievement? Doubtless as much as it can be said of any subject. But it must be recognized that we are far from realizing even a reasonable ideal in this respect.

To sum up, it may be said that the conditions of success in teaching the Classics are the same as conditions in any other field of education. They are: first, the adjustment of instruction to the capacities, interests, and needs of the pupils concerned; second, adaptation to the laws of learning; third, the adaptation of instruction to the aims and values for which the Classics are studied. That we are today far from meeting these conditions with anything like completeness should be clear to any observer of existing practice. The opportunity for classical study is greater today than ever before. Will teachers of the Classics permit the opportunity to pass through their failure to adjust themselves to the conditions and demand of modern education?